Nguyen 1

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Sophomore Honors English

3/31/2015

Lạc Đường (Astray)

The sun smiles warmly down at us from its throne in the sky. Fortunately, it’s early morning, so the temperature hasn’t gotten too hot to bear. Otherwise, this trek through the jungle wouldn’t be as calming to my agitated nerves. Luan walks in front of me, leading the way through the dense plantlife. From behind, he looks rightfully intimidating with his broad, tall shoulders casting a lengthy shadow on the ground in front of me. Even with the heavy load of my many books, his back didn’t slouch forward one bit. He moved forward carrying himself in a kingly manner, and it seemed as if the jungle parted way for his passage.

It’s astounding how my most trusted friend can be so different from me. I’m so fragile compared to him. While I spent my childhood studying the teachings of Confucius and learning myriads of Chinese characters necessary to my education, he was out in the paddies assisting his father plant next year’s rice yield. It was such a blessing to have him come into the house as a servant though. I’ve always treated him like a friend, but he’s treated me like a brother. Eleven years he’s been looking after me since we were ten years of age. He bursted into my room before the sunrise to warn me that the people of Jiaozhi were revolting against the Chinese rule. He hurriedly packed my things as I selected the books that I wanted to bring with me as we fled the home.

Nguyen 2

A tree frog in the brush croaked as Luan scared it from its perch, and I realize I don’t know where I’m being led to.

“Luan… where exactly are we headed?”

“Before I was sent to be your servant, my aunt and uncle took care of me after my parent’s died, and their son now lives out here,” he replied. His father was mauled by a mad ox in the fields, and his mother died giving birth to his younger brother who tragically didn’t survive his own birth due to suffocation during delivery.

“And how long am I to stay in hiding?” The thought of my own people rebelling against the benevolent Chinese government for too long made me sick to my stomach. Especially because in the event of a successful revolution, my teacher, my *Sư phụ* and caretaker since I can remember,will be captured and executed for being Chinese. He’s guided my education diligently, and I cannot let some heathens decide his fate.”

“I’ll return to get you as soon as the rebellion is over,” he paused and turned around to look at me, “and I’ve arranged for someone else to come for you in the event of my death.” The sun hangs directly above us now. I stop a step in front of him and wipe the sweat off my forehead. The weather had settled into a sweltering heat, and the air had become thick with moisture since the morning. He turns back and begins leading the way again.

“Why do you have to join them anyways? Can’t you see that the Chinese have only brought improvements to this land with their technology and education?”As the words come out of my mouth, I know I’m pressing into another argument.

Nguyen 3

“And are you too blind to see the people here don’t want this new culture forced onto them? There are people, our people, starving out here because the Chinese have a bottomless desire for more wealth and food! They feed off of our hard work until their eyes water, and yet they insist on more and more!”

“That’s preposterous! The Chinese only want to make our culture more sophisticated and defined. We didn’t even have any form of writing before they introduced their characters to us. They’re generous rulers, Luan, and I can’t have you throwing your life into harm’s way to overthrow a helpful government.” I’ve made my opinions open to him many times before, and he never gives in and accepts my judgement. “You’re so ignorant and ungrateful for the gifts that the Chinese have bestowed on us! If you weren’t my best friend, then I wouldn’t have decided to come with you on this little trip of yours.”

“If that’s how you feel, then carry your own blasphemous books! Go back if you want, but try not to get yourself killed in the process.” He spat the words out on the ground in front of me, and threw down my sack of books. Turning around, he moved briskly through the brush. Openbills cried out above irritated by our angry yelling. I rush to pick up my papers and hurry after him.

He stayed ahead of me for the next hour. The jungle brush felt his anger as he cut through it until we reached a road. From the road, we went south until we met the wall of bamboo that marked the borders of a village.

The home looks exactly the same as those that we passed when walking through the village area. The walls are made of wood. There are no doors or windows. Small openings stand

Nguyen 4

in their place with no flooring to be seen at the bottom of the doorway. Like the other homes, the roof is made of layers of thatching, and it extends far enough off the roof to form a small cover for the front of the home. Luan turns around to look at me.

“This is your home for the next few months. Please, be humble, this family does not have too much to offer in the way of luxury, but they have cleaned out their best room for you to stay in,” he said.

“The cure for craving is non attachment to all things, Luan,” I say remembering the teachings of religion that my teacher taught me. I never really liked those lessons as much. Walking up to me, he smiles and clasps my hands in his.

“Maybe living here, you’ll learn to appreciate who we are,” and he shakes my hand and walks past me back the way we came.

“Luan,” I call after him. He turns around with his eyes raised expectantly, as if annoyed at another selfish request. “Don’t let anyone else come back to get me.” It’s the only way that I could tell him to come back safely. He softens his eyes, nods, and turns away.

The family received me into their home warmly. I met Luan’s cousin first. He was standing outside the little abode and introduced himself to me as Quan. Inside, his wife, who later told me her name is Nhu, was feeding a small meal to their son. Their son looked to be about ten or eleven years old, and he proudly stated that his name is Ly after getting up to bow. Quan worked mostly in the rice paddies like most people in the area. but sometimes he’d go do various other chores to keep the house tidy and together. Ly didn’t go to school, so he oftentimes would follow his father around. I didn’t go out much, but I found out that there wasn’t a school

Nguyen 5

in the surrounding area. I mainly just stayed at home with Nhu, and she would sometimes tell me about their humble life in the village absentmindedly as she rubbed her enlarged stomach. She’s expecting a baby sometime in during the First month after the *Tết* celebrations.

Quan and his son often left to work the rice fields, and Nhu was always in the kitchen preparing some sort of meal or performing another chore. I was glad by the end of every day to be able to sit down with my host family and eat the company of other souls.

This night, only Nhu and I are at dinner, and she only prepared enough rice for the two of us. She set the small bowl of steaming rice on the ground in front of me, but I look up and frown.

“Where’s Ly? And his father? Aren’t they joining us for this wonderful dinner?” I inquire.

She doesn’t reply. Instead, she snatches a ball of rice from her tiny bowl and eats. I try to catch her gaze, but she continues looking down at her bowl. A bout of rain knocks at the door oddly enough as it was the dry season, and we eat in silence for the rest of the meal. She occasionally stole glances at me as if to ensure I were eating. When we finish, Nhu starts picking up the empty bowls and looks up at me for the first time tonight.

“A heavy tax was recently set upon us, we didn’t have enough rice for all of us to eat tonight. Quan insisted that you be allowed to have your fill every night, and Ly is so adamant in letting me eat because of my pregnancy.” I looked at her blankly for a moment. Processing what was told to me. She didn’t want to tell me why the other two weren’t there until after I had my fill of food.

“But, surely there’s enough for your family to eat most of the time isn’t there?”

Nguyen 6

“We’ve already gone through our supply, and are borrowing a neighbor’s until the next harvest. Although, it seems the fields have overflooded in some areas--”

“--There must be a mistake, the Chinese wouldn’t let their subjects starve like this,” I interjected.

“No, they ask an amount from us and we must accommodate that number. That’s the end of it.”

“And this is every year? You’ve been starving yourself almost a month a year since how long?”

“Every year since I can remember.” She says this slowly, and I’m glad for this because it’s hard for me to grasp. How many other people have had to deal with food shortages? What other things has my teacher kept from me about the Chinese? I’m standing there staring at the ground, lost in the possibilities of what else don’t I know about my own people. Am I really that disconnected? I snap out of it and realize that Nhu had went back to her cleaning, so I retreat back to my room.

I ran through memories that suggested my people were living in poverty. The one that nagged me constantly was the image of a young servant boy that was punished for staring at my dinner one night. He returned to me after being scolded, and he apologized with eyes puffy from his tears. He glanced over his shoulder at his superior. I was told that he didn’t get his dinner that night, and now I’m not sure if that would’ve already happened anyways.

Nguyen 7

I drowned the memories and questions out with study and research. I went on long walks around the village to pay my respects to the shrines that they had erected around for various forest spirits and deities. It was during these walks that I heard rumors about the rebellion. It’s lead by a woman and her sister. They are called the Trung sisters. The elder one, who began the rebellion, is named Trung Trac, and her sister had the name Trung Nhi. They were born around Me Linh to a local chief and a descendant of the first kings of Nan Yueh. The reason behind their insurrection was a little muddled in the hearsay. One man told me that Trac’s husband, Thi Sach, was the lord of some far off prefect and was executed under suspicion of treason, and that was why Trac was angered to start the war. Either that, or they were fed up with the taxes being raised again on the Vietnamese people. A young woman said that Thi Sach still lives and is fighting alongside his wife on the battlefield. At any rate, it seems they are currently winning the war. Which is something I’ve been debating on whether it’s a good or a bad thing.

The days got much cooler as the year came to a close. I’m meditating by the sunlight in my room when I feel a light tap on my shoulder. Ly’s inquisitive eyes stared back at me when I open my eyes.

“Sorry, sir, I thought you were sleeping,” he smiled.

“How would I have been sleeping sitting upright?” I wonder.

“I don’t know, mister, you talk a little funny, so maybe you sleep funny too.” What?

“What about my speech is so odd?”

“Well, you use all these words that I don’t understand, but my mom tells me that they’re old Chinese words that people used to use. Are you an old man? You don’t look that old to me.”

Nguyen 8

He touched one hand to his face and began stroking an imaginary beard while saying this. As if he were pondering the answers. “Anyways, my mom told me that you knew how to write, and you know that New Year’s is coming up, so I just wanna ask you something.”

“I’m happy to answer.” I try to encourage the question out of him with a slight nod, and I lean in to hear better.

“You know those red banners that have New Years wishes written on them all pretty? Can you make a couple of those for the village? The old man that used to come around to make them must’ve gotten lost because he hasn’t shown up for two years now.”

I remember those. I would see them hung outside the house around the city. The Chinese people didn’t celebrate the Lunar New Years, so I always spent the days during the festival with my teacher wondering about the loud noises of the jubilee outside.

“I’d love to try, Ly,” I answer. That was satisfactory for him, and he runs out of the room to assist his father.

In the following days, I spent most of my time writing personalized banners for people in the village who could bring me the materials. It was very time consuming because each character had to be written with expert calligraphy or else I would start back over. Each banner had to look beautifully crafted when I gave it to the person who requested it.

I started counting the days until the twenty third day of the month before the New Year. On this day, they tell me that Ong Tao, the kitchen deity, leaves his resting place in the ovens of family households and returns to heaven where he reports the families’ past year. He tells about all that occurred within the house and its inhabitants. So, Quan called the whole house to the

Nguyen 9

kitchen at night to send him off on his journey. We just sat there in the kitchen and prayed for an hour or so, but I felt strangely happy to sit quietly and watch as the smoke from the incense twisted into the air . I’d only observed Chinese holidays until this year.

The following days of Tet fill up with sweet scents and bright the bright colors of spring. People around the village supply extra traditional foods to those who don’t have the luxury to buy from merchants themselves. Our home is decorated with red and a single potted *Cây Mai* tree. Its flowers bloom around the time of the New Year and they light up the room with their bright yellow petals. Throughout the whole village, everyone takes the whole week off to celebrate with family and friends. All around the village, people hung their banners with my handwriting. *Phúc, lộc, thọ…* happiness, wealth, and long life wave in the afternoon breeze.

On the first day of *Tết,* families are to spend the day visiting the paternal side of their extended family, so Quan brings us along to visit his older brother. His father died a long time ago, but his mother still lived with his brother. His home is hidden in a little clearing surrounded by tall bamboo trees that were likely planted many generations ago. The sun could only climb through the thick foliage to illuminate the house itself. As we approached the little hut, a man I assume to be Quan’s brother comes out to welcome us.

“Quan! I was starting to worry that I had to come visit you!” He embraced Quan with a smile and nodded toward Nhu who returned a timid smile. Ly bows and greets him formally, but his uncle pulled him in to ruffle his hair.

“You don’t have to worry about your manners with me, I’m your favorite uncle.” He teases him. He looks up and seems to finally me.

Nguyen 10

“Now, you must be our noble scholar.” He grinned at me. One of his top row canines are missing, and his left eye opened slightly larger than his right. The closer he came to me the shorter he became. By the time he is standing in front of me, he’s half a head closer to the ground than I. Shaking his hands I ask:

“Where is your gracious mother? I’d like to talk with her as this is a time to be appreciative of the wisdom of the elderly , is it not?.”

“Nice to meet you too, friend, I’m Cao. She’s lying in her bed right inside.” Cao regarded me with a confused gaze. I give him my thanks and head straight into the home.

I find her in the kitchen lying on a long wooden bed padded with multiple blankets by the fireplace. She snores loudly as I approach her. I decide to turn around and leave her to her sleep, but she sneezes herself awake.

“Is that you, Cao? Have they arrived yet? Come here, son.” She wipes her eyes and turns her head over toward me. “Oh, who are you?” Her face scrunches up trying to recognize me.

“Ah-- I’m sorry to disturb your sleep. I’ll come back before I leave.” I start to head toward the door.

“Aw that’s nonsense, come here and talk with me. I don’t get many visitors, and I don’t get around very much anymore as you can tell. Euh. There’s a stool over there.” She waves her hand vaguely at the corner above her head. Her other hand rested itself over her eyes as if to shield herself from the sun, though it is nearly too dark to see in the room. Sitting down next to her, I can see her more clearly. Her hair has only a few random streaks of faint black left. Her arm is all wrinkled and bony. When she removes her hand from her face I can see that she’s

Nguyen 11

frightfully pale. In a place as sunny as Nan Yueh, she must have stuck on this bed for a long while before getting this pale.

“What, are you just going to stare at me?” She slapped me on the back of my head.

“I’m sorry, I was just lost in thought for a moment.” I apologized while rubbing my head.

“Now there’s a dangerous place to get lost. You might find yourself permanently lost one day. Hey, aren’t you the one Luan always talks about? What’s your name… Phuong?” She rests her eyes again like she is satisfied with the sight of my pain and surprise.

“No, actually it’s Duong. I came to visit to listen to your some wisdom. If you have any that you wish to share.” I had no idea what to expect. The only elderly person I know is my teacher, and he spends all his time worrying about my knowledge instead. She half chuckled and half coughed.

“And exactly what kind of *wisdom* is it that you are looking for?” The question had a mocking tone to it.

“I’m not sure. I’d like anything you have to offer. I don’t know very much about the Vietnamese people, maybe you could tell me a little bit about that.” When I finish the sentence she peeks one eye open at me.

“Hm? Your grandparents didn’t talk your ear off already with all the stories?”

“No, my grandparents are currently dead, and they’ve been that way for a long while now. I grew up with my teacher as my caretaker because my parents moved to China as ambassadors.”

Nguyen 12

“What a lonely childhood you’ve had, huh? Almost as sad as young Luan when his parents died. I guess your parents left you by choice though. That’s a shame.” Both of her eyes returned to their familiar resting position. Her last words struck me of guard. “Don’t be so hurt, boy, many of our people don’t get enough to eat on a regular basis here kids lose parents and parents lose children all the time. When you’ve grown up in this culture where you’re to be polite to everyone older than you, it’s nice to be the oldest and finally be able to speak as freely as you’d like.”

“I don’t understand…”

“Oh of course you don’t you’ve been growing up as a little prince. Do you want me to tell you about the history of our people or not?”

I decide to ignore her rudeness. Curiosity is getting the better of me at the moment.

“You are such a good child. Once upon a time, there was a Dragon King. His name was Lac Long Quan, and he met and married a goddess from the high mountains. The goddess was named Au Co. Together they had 100 eggs from which 100 sons were hatched. They then established a nation that stretched from one end of asia to the other. But, they became unhappy because they missed their original homes. Au co took 50 of the sons and returned to the highlands. Lac Long Quan was left with the other 50 sons and ruled over the lowlands that would be Nam Viet today. The eldest son of the Dragon King inherited the throne and named the nation Van Lang. The Hung Dynasty then prospered for many many years, and that from where we are descended. You and I are of the blood of Dragons. You should be more proud of who you are. Don’t let yourself be drowned by this Chinese flood into our nation.”

Nguyen 13

I furrow my brow. What an interesting story of our origin. “Thank you very much for telling me that story.”

“Story? That was *history*, alright? Now get out of here, I’m tired. Tell Cao that I’ll have dinner in the morning.” As I leave, I hear her coughing violently into her hands.

The rest of that evening is so blurry. All that I can think about is how my culture was stolen from me. They spent all that time trying to make me be like them. They were trying to erase my people’s story from the world and I was going to be part of their plan. We do not visit Nhu’s parents the next because they had already passed away as she is the youngest in her family. On the third day, all I can think about is my teacher and whether or not he actually wanted me to grow up intelligent. He sheltered me from so many things growing up that I can’t recall the times where I wasn’t being attended or watched by someone Chinese.

Fortunately, I could enjoy the rest of Tet. Things returned to normal with Quan and Ly going out to work in the paddies, and Ly began coming in to ask about what it was that I had in the scripts I’d brought with me. The days passed by much quicker as I ventured out into the village more often to converse with other elders. I received word that the Trung Sisters were triumphant in their rebellion and had declared themselves joint queens of Nam Viet with their capitol in Me Linh.

Luan arrives the following month. I’m busy writing down the things that I’d heard from people around the village when he appears at the doorway to my room. We quickly embrace each other and I ask him how it was fighting in the rebellion. We sit down on my little floor mat

Nguyen 14

and he tells me about his adventures combatting the Chinese garrisons, and we talk well into the night. There is eventually a silence between us.

“Duong, you know that you are no longer a lord, correct? The joint queens are picking new governors for their new nation.”

I looked at him for a moment and considered how I felt about that. “That’s alright, I’d rather sit around and study than rule over these people.”

“I don’t have anywhere to escort you back to.”

“That’s also fine.” We sit there again and look outside to see the flower petals dancing in the wind of the cold night.

“You know, I might just open up a school right here in this village. Teachers are a pretty highly regarded position in our culture.” I say dreaming aloud.

“What do you know about our culture?” He looks at me incredulously.

“A little more than I did five months ago.” I say with a grin.